

The Star-Ledger

Is jury duty still required? What you need to know about coronavirus and N.J. courts.

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published March 12, 2020

New Jersey residents must still report for jury duty, but some courts are preparing for virtual hearings as the coronavirus spreads worldwide.

The Superior Court, tax court, the appellate division and the Supreme Court may soon move online or have proceedings by phone, state Supreme Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner said Monday.

“Any such proceedings would have to not only accommodate the parties but also create a record and allow for public access — the hallmark of any judicial system,” Rabner wrote.

However, there are no plans to run virtual jury trials in criminal cases, according to judiciary spokesman Peter McAleer.

“We have not seen jurors drop out or not show up in high numbers,” McAleer wrote in an email, although he said some parts of the state were granting deferments at a “slightly above normal” rate.

Juries are a cornerstone of democracy, and jurors make decisions on many of the hundreds of thousands of cases that move through state courts every year.

At the same time, officials have cautioned residents to avoid close contact with others through “social distancing.”

Almost two dozen people have tested positive for the virus in New Jersey, and one has died. Gov. Phil Murphy declared a state of emergency earlier this week, while the World Health Organization named the crisis a “pandemic” Wednesday.

Here’s what this means for New Jersey courts.

Are the courts open?

Yes, and they’re “currently maintaining normal business operations,” the chief justice said.

Do I still have to answer the call for jury duty?

Yes. However, please call your local jury office to reschedule if you’re sick or have coronavirus concerns.

“Illness and other coronavirus concerns are being accepted as a reason for deferring jury service to a later date,” McAleer wrote.

Should I still report for probation?

Please do. Anyone under court supervision, which also includes drug court and pre-trial monitoring, should report as usual, according to this court FAQ.

If you’re sick, call your supervisor.

I’m a lawyer. Should I tell the court about my client’s sickness?

Not in official documents.

Rabner wrote that “personal health information should not be included in pleadings or other documents filed with the courts, including follow-up letters requesting or confirming adjournments.”

As an attorney, do I still have to attend training in person to keep my job?

No. The chief justice relaxed education requirements for lawyers Tuesday.

While attorneys must sit through a certain number of classroom hours every two years, you may now check that box through approved online courses.

I work for the courts. Is my work trip cancelled?

Possibly.

On Friday, the chief justice said international business travel will no longer be approved. Local events with international participants will either be rescheduled, or they will have people abroad call in.

Trips to other states may be approved in advance by the court’s acting administrative director, but you’re unlikely to get the green light to travel to states heavily affected by COVID-19.